Introduction

Student Resistance and the Cultural Production of Space

The day before school started one September, I lost my classroom on the quiet south side of the building to a new Freshman Block program. My reassigned room on the noisy east side was an old computer room filled with Mac Classics bolted to the tops of tables. Though some computers worked, most needed repairs or were missing keyboards. During the summer, workers renovating the school had cut the wires, leaving no Internet access and no network, so the few working computers were essentially useless. Trying not to start the term demoralized, I dragged the old Macs into the hall and scrambled to find real desks in other rooms. When I removed the computer tables, I discovered that the floor was lined with electrical sockets that stuck up two inches and sent up sparks when I dragged a chair over them. I tried to arrange the furniture to hide these obstacles the best I could. The room was filled with an eclectic but functional mix of desks and chairs, and the sockets were reasonably concealed when the thirty Black sophomores in my first class arrived the next day.

After we introduced ourselves, I handed out two lists of rules. I labeled one “Dictatorship Rules,” established by the school and district, such as “no fighting” as well as “no headphones,” “no cell phones” and “no hats.” I went over these rules and told students, “We don’t have any say in these
rules, but we have to follow them.” They seemed familiar with them and indifferently turned to the second list that I had labeled “Democratic Rules,” which pertained to our particular classroom and, I insisted, were things we could control. This list included such items as “no gum,” the penalty for lateness, and my “three pass policy,” which permitted each student to leave the room with my official hall pass three times a term. I explained that this list of rules was merely a proposal. They were to meet with their “committees” and decide if they wanted to ratify these rules, propose changes, or reject them for entirely new ones.

They met in groups of five and looked at each other awkwardly. However, slowly the groups began talking and by the end of the ten-minute discussion period were generally engaged in lively conversations. I called the class back together and asked for proposals from the floor. They immediately challenged the gum rule on the grounds that “bad breath” was an unfair burden. “You teachers want us to work in groups, but you can’t work if someone’s breath is stink—you got to give the brotha some gum!” a student named Tekwon argued.

“I don’t care about what’s in your mouth, but look at the ceiling,” I instructed. They looked up at the fifteen-foot ceiling and slowly began to giggle as they noticed the wads of gum that had found their way up there. I continued, “It’s the gum on the seats, the walls, the desks, and the ceiling that always causes disruptions.” They debated with me fiercely as I sought to convince them that gum was not necessary to their educations. Eventually they proposed, “Students can chew gum but must dispose of it properly. If someone sits in gum, the class can’t have gum for a week (even if we didn’t put the gum there). If Ms. Dickar sees gum, we will clean it up.” I was satisfied with these amendments because the students took responsibility for the gum in the room. With all in agreement, it became our “gum policy.”

With this small victory under their belts, the students began debating how many times they could be late before I should exact a penalty. Though they had been united in their struggle for gum, they were more divided about how late was “late” and how often students needed to be late. Some argued that students should never be late, while others insisted that it was impossible to get to class on time because of the crowding in the halls. They debated this issue quite intensely, but as they were unable to create either a zero-tolerance policy or a no-penalty policy, agreed on
my original proposal that three unexcused “lates” would result in a five-point deduction from their grade. With the period winding down, a student named Andrea, who had sat quietly through most of the discussion cut in, “Fine, whatever, but we got to discuss this pass rule!” She proposed that there should be no limits on when students could take the pass because they were mature enough to use it responsibly.

“What if you used your passes and you got to throw up?” Tekwon added, mocking vomiting as he spoke.

“Or you got your period?” added Belinda, lifting her head up off her desk.

“You shouldn’t use the pass if you don’t need it.” I countered. “The idea of the rule is to get you to save it for these emergencies.”

Akil shot back, “What if you got a bladder problem? You can’t be limiting passes when some people got medical conditions!” Many “yeahs” followed his comment.

“Does anyone here have a medical condition?” I asked. No one raised a hand, but Akil quickly recovered, “No one want to put they business in the street like that, Miss!” Tekwon added, “I’m very sensitive about my diseases!” acting wounded as he raised his eyebrows at Belinda, whose head remained down though her eyes peered out at the class.

“Tekwon got AIDS,” mumbled a male voice as students giggled.

The class was about to lose focus, so I said, “I don’t want Tekwon to have to tell us about his diseases either. Let’s add to the rule that if someone brings a note from home explaining why they need more passes, they can have them.” Students around the room seemed to nod in agreement.

“Okay, let’s vote on this rule.”

“Wait, Miss!” Andrea called out. “Look, it ain’t about diseases. I’m gonna keep it real with you—sometimes we just don’t want to be here.”

“You mean, sometimes you ask for the pass when you don’t have to go to the bathroom?” I asked, mocking naiveté.

“Sometimes . . . ,” Andrea agreed. “Most of the time!” another voice added.

“Yeah, Miss. Sometimes I got business to attend to!” said Akil, pretending an air of importance.

“Miss, sometimes we need to go, but mostly, we just want to get out and be in the hall,” Andrea clarified. “No offense, Miss,” she added, a mischievous smile now breaking across her face. “Sometimes, y’all teachers can
be boring!” The class laughed with agreement and added to the emphasis on boring—interjecting examples. “Mr. [X] is so boring, I feel bored just walking by his room.”

“He’s so boring that two periods after his class, I’m still bored!”

The class was disintegrating into joking and laughter as I yelled, “Do you mean that if I’m going to limit when you can leave the room, that I have to make the class interesting?” Their laughter died down as they seemed to think about what I had said.

Andrea broke the silence, “Interesting or boring, Miss, I still want the pass.” Someone else mumbled, “Amen.” I paused and said, “Now I’m going to keep it real with you—I can’t let you take the pass whenever you want because everyone would take it and Ms. [Principal] would get on my case.”

“Okay, Miss, but three passes is too little. We should get, like, three a marking period.” Knowing there were three marking periods in a term, I offered, “Let’s split the difference—how’s two a marking period?” We voted and ratified our new rules as students began packing up in anticipation of the bell. I quickly handed out a reflection asking students to define “dictatorship” and “democracy” based on the activity and to discuss which they preferred.

This anecdote from my time teaching from 1996 to 2000 at Renaissance High School (pseudonym), a racially segregated public high school in New York City, contains themes that would emerge in my study of the relationship between student culture and school reform. Central to the conflicts and contradictions in everyday life at Renaissance was the on-going tension between the student-dominated halls and the teacher-dominated classrooms despite the democratic school reform effort under way at the time. As my students’ desire to get the pass indicated, no matter how good or bad the class, the call of the hall loomed as a formidable spatial challenge to teaching.

The conflict between the hall and classroom was the most salient conflict shaping school life, but it was not the only spatialized struggle between students and school. Before my third period students could get in the building and its halls, they had to go through full-body scanning at the front door, a ritual designed to rid them of weapons and anti-school paraphernalia, such as markers or Wite-Out (which could be used for graffiti), scissors, sharp pencils, or hair sticks (which could be used in fights), as
well as gang signs such as beads, bandanas, and colors. This border check-
point imposed a notion of the good student as a disarmed, de-cultured
student and constructed some street-oriented identities as inappropriate
for school. Thus, the front-door scan marked the spatial division between
the streets on one side and the school on the other. Once scanned, most
students participated in a student-dominated hall culture derived from
the very street culture the school hoped to silence when students entered.
This derivative of the street thrived in the hall between classes and often
well beyond, as lateness was epidemic and students took the hall passes
to escape back into the halls as frequently as possible. My effort to limit
the hall pass and lateness was an effort to contain students in an academic
space. Their desire to get the pass was an effort to control their time, to
limit my power to control their bodies, and to maintain connection to
the hall spaces where their activities and agendas were central. Thus, in
addition to security scanning at the front door, the halls and classrooms
were daylong sites of struggle over what activities and whose values would
dominate.

These conflicts are the local terms through which space was culturally
produced and contested at Renaissance. By “culturally contested” I mean
the conflicted ways that students and teachers performed depending on
location and context. Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) describe the
cultural production of the educated person as situated “within and against
larger societal forces which instantiate themselves in schools and other in-
stitutions” (14). These larger societal forces can be read in the ways spaces
are occupied and challenged. Through exploring the uses of space at Re-
naissance, we gain concrete images of historical, social, and ideological
forces that are the implicit elements behind choices made by teachers and
students. The halls, the classrooms, and the doorway scanning are where
school is culturally produced as an everyday experience. These spaces are
not inevitable but rather are created, allowing for the possibility of inter-
ventions to change the social relations that generate conflict between stu-
dents and schooling.

In the case of my classroom, space was culturally produced on several
levels. The physical space was designed initially by architects and ulti-
mately by the economic and political conditions that frame school expe-
riences for the Black, low-income, urban students who attended Renais-
sance. My efforts to create a comfortable and safe learning environment
out of the dilapidated computer room couldn’t mask the thoughtless indignity such conditions implied—an environmental sign from dominant society to these students that they don’t count. Further, while the computers were outdated and broken, four new air conditioners installed as part of the recent renovations sat uselessly in the windows because the cord of only one could reach the designated plug. Thus, my students sat in cast-off furniture in a recently renovated though dangerous classroom and stared at three useless air conditioners witnessing both the lack and waste of resources. The casual disregard that had helped produce my classroom could be found throughout the building as doorknobs broke and pipes leaked as soon as the construction trailers left the campus. For years prior to the renovations, the wretched condition of the crumbling building conveyed the marginality of the students who attended school there. Now, the renovations reiterated that message of indifference and contempt despite a cosmetic makeover.

In this physical and social setting, a White woman in her early thirties, like me, proposed a democratic and humane pedagogy. However, I couldn’t avoid representing the educational establishment despite my effort to distance myself from official policies I irreverently dubbed “dictatorship rules.” Though unable to amend some of the rules they hated most, I hoped to align myself with my students (not against them). My students, all Black and Hispanic, tested my conflicted position through their humor and melodrama. They were showing friendly suspicion while I was asking them to trust me. Our implicit and explicit discourse over the rules pushed the issue—what kind of space would this classroom be? Would the teacher unilaterally control it or would they be able to shape it to better suit their agendas?

Though I asked my students to co-construct a more democratic learning environment with me, we still performed inside physical and pedagogical conditions produced by segregation and White privilege. Nonetheless, within these limits we exercised our own agency as we negotiated the nature and meaning of that classroom space. At the same time, we also were negotiating the role of the halls as students sought to increase their access and I to diminish it. Thus, the spaces through which we maneuvered were both products of structural inequality and products of our own making. Though on that particular day I had put the rules on the table for negotiation, the prevailing ethos of classrooms is, in fact, always negotiated, if
only tacitly, through the degrees of cooperation and resistance students enact. Our efforts to agree on a set of classroom rules highlighted the ways classrooms and halls are always already produced when we arrive, though vulnerable to our conscious intervention through cultural exchanges and political struggles.

The upcoming chapters pursue this exploration of the ways school spaces are culturally produced, particularly when regarding urban students and schools. This book applies the insights of cultural geographers to the study of urban school cultures. The theorists from whom I will be drawing have demonstrated that social spaces are culturally produced by the history, economic systems, social relationships, and mores that define day-to-day life (Tuan 1977 and 1990; Soja 1989; Harvey 1990; Massey 1994). More specifically, daily life is informed by critical studies of the geography of childhood that recognize that “children’s identities and lives are made and (re)made through the sites of everyday life” (Holloway and Valentine 2000). Like playgrounds (Gagen 2000), urban and suburban spaces (Davis 1990; Haymes 1995), and the Las Vegas strip (Venturi, Brown, and Izenour 1977) the spaces inside schools are shaped by the discourses of those who use them and who also are, in turn, shaped by these spaces.

Though many disciplines have been informed by the “spatial turn” (Massey 1993), educational studies have been slow to mine the insights of critical geographers. However, recent research on literacy practices examines space as a multiply produced environment that informs literate action within it (Leander and Sheehy 2004). More than just understanding space as a conveyor of meaning, these scholars are mapping the ways it is constantly redefined through social practices. Leander’s (2004) study of a literature class, for example, demonstrates that social spaces construct individuals but also are transformed by them as the individuals appropriate these spaces for their own purposes.

Though few qualitative studies of urban schools have focused on space itself as a site of social struggle, several studies have not ignored the social geography of schools. For example, Flores-Gonzalez (2005) describes how rigid tracking at an urban high school in Chicago created two distinct social worlds of “school kids” and “street kids.” Valenzuela (1999) notes how school practices create different spaces for those who possess different amounts and forms of cultural capital. Other scholars have noted the ways students become segregated even in integrated schools (Tatum 1999;
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Lewis 2004; Pollock 2004). Eckert (1989) noted the different spaces occupied by “jocks” and “burnouts” in schools, and Foley (1990) charted the social geography of a high school pep rally to note the ways social locations are normalized and reinforced through the seats students occupy at school events. These studies trace out how the spaces students physically occupy reflect their social and academic identities within the school and, ultimately, their access to resources and opportunity. Though useful, such analysis focuses on relatively static conceptions of space. In this study I will argue that school spaces are constantly contested and “leaky,” bleeding into one another in significant ways as parties express multiple intentions.

Other scholars have raised critical questions about spatial formation in schools, particularly probing the ways certain discourses prevail in school spaces and why. For example, Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997) trace the ways schools informed student discourses on race and racism through the policies implementing racial integration. In one high school, school officials tacitly supported the reproduction of White supremacy and the racist assumptions of White, working-class, male students, while in another high school teachers disrupted the reproduction of racist hierarchies by creating spaces for students to reflect on the meaning of race, class, and culture. Fine, Weis, and Powell’s study offers an example of the ways school spaces are culturally produced, as school practices and pedagogies reflected the values and power struggles within communities and informed prevailing discourses.

Some scholars examining the production and implementation of educational policy have drawn crucial connections between the policy and physical spaces not just of schools but also of the cities in which they are embedded (Anyon 1997; Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000; Lipman 2004). Lipman (2004), for example, examines the ways school policy in Chicago reflects the broad trend of globalization by sharpening geographic segregation, exacerbating social inequalities, marginalizing racial minorities, and increasing class divisions that are readily inscribed on urban space. Importantly though, she argues that these spaces are also vulnerable to change through local action. Her study of the impact of educational policies on specific Chicago schools demonstrates the complex factors, globally, nationally, and locally, that inform the cultural production of space in schools and in cities.
Expanding on this critical educational research, I explore competing discourses about who students are, what the purpose of schooling should be, and what knowledge is valuable as these discourses became spatialized in daily school life. I argue that ideologies and discourses become grafted onto specific school spaces (halls, classrooms, doorways, etc.) through social struggles, and that these spatial formations reveal the ways schools are both sites of conflict and conflicted sites. This spatial analysis calls attention to the contradictions inherent in official school discourses and those generated by students and teachers more locally. By examining the form and substance of student/school engagement, this study argues for a more nuanced and broader framework that reads multiple forms of resistance and recognizes the ways students themselves are conflicted about schooling. Rather than being staunch resisters or eager accommodationists, at the time of my study, most students moved between these positions as they often were critical of the school while believing elements of the “education gospel” (Lazerson 2005).

Renaissance in Context

Renaissance High School served a student population that was 96 percent Black and 4 percent Hispanic at the time of this study. Located in New York City in the heart of one of the largest Caribbean communities in the United States, the majority of the students were immigrants or the children of immigrants from the West Indies. Of the student population, 45.7 percent who entered Renaissance were over age for their grade, as many students had repeated at least one grade prior to entering high school. Of the students who entered Renaissance as freshmen, fewer than 30 percent graduated within four years, and half never earned diplomas at all. Seventy-five percent of the students were eligible for free lunch, which indicates high levels of poverty.

Renaissance was a smaller school that had been carved from “Old School,” a large, comprehensive high school that had languished on the state’s list of failing schools for years. In 1994, Old School was restructured and three smaller schools (though not small by the standards of the contemporary Small Schools Movement) were opened in its place. These new entities had their own territory within the same building, their own principals, and their own reform agenda, though they shared the cafeteria
and auditorium. Each served between 800 and 1000 students from the same “enchantment” area covered by Old School. The three new schools shared a similar profile, though one of the schools had a small and reputable magnet honors program and the other had a large English as a Second Language (ESL) program that served many Haitian students.

Of the three new schools, Renaissance adopted the most progressive reform strategy, including a broadly democratic school-based planning (SBP) team that gave teachers, staff, students, and family members equal voting rights. Teachers voted to make their own attendance at the weekly meetings mandatory. In addition, ten to fifteen students attended the meetings regularly, as well as a few parents. However, when controversial issues arose, such as the Police Department taking over school security, many more parents and community members came. In addition, part of the school’s mission included the use of student-centered collaborative pedagogies that drew on student cultural identities to empower student voices in the classroom. Renaissance also developed sub-schools that organized teachers around students by grade and switched to a block-program that established longer class periods (100 minutes) to accommodate the time demands of student-centered, project-based pedagogy. Last, Renaissance was “detracked.” No courses isolated high achievers except two AP courses (English and calculus) that some students took in their senior year. I first taught English at Old School from 1989 to 1991 and then Social Studies at the new Renaissance High School from 1996 to 2000.

Despite significant reform efforts to put students at the center, Renaissance fared only a little better than Old School in test scores and graduation rates. Old School had been hierarchically organized and prided itself on its traditional stance on education, which was echoed in its impressive neo-Gothic architecture. Once, it had an outstanding academic reputation and boasted many famous alumni drawn from an upwardly mobile, predominantly Jewish community. As Whites fled inner cities to the greener pastures of the suburbs in the 1950s through 1970s, Old School became increasingly populated by Black students, particularly Caribbean immigrants, and, at the same time, its academic reputation and the condition of its physical plant declined. Like my classroom, the physical condition of Old School was a product of more than just underfunding, it was a product of the social, economic, and political changes undermining cities across America.
By the 1980s, Old School had one of the worst reputations in the city, a demoralized teaching staff, and a dilapidated campus. However, the corps of educators who formed Renaissance believed that Old School had failed because it was unresponsive to student needs and contemptuous of student culture. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned reform efforts these educators implemented yielded only minimal results. Though the reform effort did generate a different pedagogical philosophy and modest curricular changes, its enigmatic lack of impact suggests that school experience is shaped by far more than school practices alone.

These attempts to make classrooms more student-centered met a formidable culture in the halls far more compelling than the classroom for many students. These reforms also took place amid increased top-down control of classrooms through high-stakes exams and standardized curricula, as well as school district mandates. In the chapters that follow, I examine three physical sites where students and school authority contended: the halls, the classroom, and the school entrance. Each of these contentious sites had a structure and character of its own, but the experiences in one site conditioned the terms of engagement in the others.

Method

My first teaching stint at Old School, from 1989 to 1991, awakened my interest in the spatial factors of schooling and informed my decision to go to graduate school to gain the tools to analyze what was happening in urban schools. I returned five years later to conduct scholarly research in American Studies and to teach. Trained in discourse analysis and historical research, I planned to use archival research and informant interviews to explore how the physical space of the school—the grandness of the architecture, the wretched decay of the building— informed the ways people perceived and used the school and how teachers and students spoke about their environment and experience vis-à-vis race and class in America.

However, I had left Old School a crumbling, unreformed, traditional, large school and came back to a place that was in the midst of extensive renovations and that had been restructured into new, smaller schools. Before the renovations, the degraded physical plant permeated teacher talk, but when I returned, the building had seemingly withered away as a topic of discussion. It was replaced by talk of Regents results (the state-wide
exams required for high school graduation) and getting off the “SURR” list (the state’s list of failing schools), about the strategies of school reform, and about the kids themselves. My experiences back at Old School (now Renaissance) changed my conception of “space.” Rather than understanding it as a passive transmitter of social meanings, I realized it was actively negotiated and contested—it both produced and was produced. I needed to develop a research plan that would enable me to capture the dynamics of spatial interaction.

My desire to get at how space was constructed and constructing made my role as a teacher problematic. I was not only interested in understanding power struggles, I also was a participant in those struggles. Student resistance frustrated me—I could not pretend a dispassionate stance when many evenings I went home fuming over disruptions in my class or in the halls. My teaching and research only complicated my frustration because I saw the clash of cultures that was producing these disruptions. Being an involved teacher gave me a chance to know the situation and my limits in it. However, teaching was so consuming that I had to take a year off from it in order to conduct the research that would enable me to read the conflicts at the school more deeply.

Critics of teacher research have argued that “dual-role” conflicts may undermine the integrity of the research method or, worse, sacrifice the needs of “clients” for the sake of research (Hammock 1997). These concerns are valid and warrant being addressed. Teaching is an emotionally and intellectually engrossing activity, such that I found it very hard to slip into and out of the role of researcher. I could not conduct the kind of study I wanted while remaining a classroom teacher and, thus, seized the opportunity afforded by a fellowship to take a leave of absence, allowing me to step out of my role as teacher and focus on being a researcher. Though I was not teaching at the time I conducted my interviews, I was still known to most participants as a teacher. I sought to down play this identity by dressing as a graduate student—jeans, t-shirts, hair down, no make-up—rather than as a teacher—slacks, jacket, and hair bound in a tight, stereotypical teacher’s bun. During that time, I interviewed students and teachers and hung out in the halls to try to see what I couldn’t see from the teacher’s role. Nonetheless, it would have been impossible to not be read as a teacher, and I never tried to pretend I was something other than what I am.
As a researcher, I followed guidelines spelled out by my university and by the school district. All students volunteered based on signs posted in halls. I did not directly recruit students in order to insure that no one felt coerced. Such recruitment was not necessary, as I was inundated with student volunteers. Though I was a White teacher, students seemed eager to talk, one saying, “its about time you teachers asked us what we thought!” No doubt my role as a teacher created methodological concerns and limited some of what students and colleagues would share, but it also provided me a familiar identity that credited my project to students. My time at the school had enabled me to develop trust with a good number of students, and my desire to understand school from their point of view validated their experiences.

In noting the dilemmas of the dual role, I do not want to undervalue the potential strengths of teachers as researchers. First, as I hope this book demonstrates, my position as a teacher enabled me to develop much deeper insight into some of the tensions in school culture. Second, the devaluing of teacher voices as legitimate ones has widened the gulf between research and practice as teachers dismiss educational research because it does not resonate with their experience. I hope this work helps bridge that gap.

More significantly, we need to rethink research paradigms that privilege the perspective of the outside observer as objective and disinterested. Critiques of the dual role of teacher/researcher are based on assumptions that as members of school communities, teachers can neither be objective nor can they avoid coercing student participants. Though certainly, both concerns must be addressed at all phases of the research process, they should not necessarily disqualify teachers as legitimate producers of knowledge about urban schools. Feminist ethnographers have raised ethical concerns about research paradigms that privilege the outsider or “watcher” as objective and the insider or watched as subjective because such models reproduce oppressive patriarchal and colonialist hierarchies (Behar 1995). Aggarwal (2000) argues for a feminist anthropology that is dialogic and shifts the traditional “looking at” to “looking out for.” Rather than study a group and disappear, she calls for researchers to forge meaningful relationships with subjects and sustain those relationships after the study is over. It is in this tradition of connected and committed research for social justice that this study was forged.
Data

To address the concerns about coercion and objectivity, first, I passively recruited subjects so that students would not feel pressured. Second, I triangulated data by drawing on student interviews, teacher interviews, and my own observations. I then disaggregated student interviews by the academic orientation of students to clarify what may have been widespread and what was more specific to an academic subgroup. The central source of data used here are interviews with thirty-seven students from 10th through 12th grades who represent a spectrum of academic performance from high achieving to failing.

Student volunteers each participated in an open-ended interview conducted in school, lasting from thirty to ninety minutes. All participants were promised confidentiality and were asked about what they did in the halls and in classrooms, what mattered most to them about their school lives, and what they liked and disliked about school. As findings emerged, additional focus groups were used to check these observations. In addition, the interviews with students and focus groups were supplemented by interviews with seventeen teachers and administrators. Observations in the halls and classrooms conducted when I was a teacher from 1996 to 2000 and during the interview period (spring 1999), also provide significant data for this study. All names used are pseudonyms.

Though participants were recruited without consideration of their academic standing, gender, or cultural background, once the initial interviews were complete, they were disaggregated according to gender and their relationship to academic work. Self-reported academic achievement and attitude as well as their responses to some questions indicated that of the thirty-seven volunteers, ten (eight girls and two boys) were high achieving (HA), earning at least a B average and identifying strongly with academic success; ten others (six girls and four boys) were identified as academically oriented (AO) in that they generally passed their classes and made an effort to do well but averaged Cs and Ds. These students were at their grade level at the time of the interview and were on-track to graduate in four years. The seventeen remaining participants were nonacademically oriented. Of these, eight (three girls and five boys) were identified as ambivalent toward school (Amb) in that they sought to do just enough to pass and were making some progress toward graduation, though for half
of them, it took more than four years to do so. These students chose not to make deep investments in their educational futures or did so inconsistently, but they did want to earn a high school diploma. Nine (four girls and five boys) were identified as highly alienated (AL) in that they showed little interest in academic work, were frequently late, cut classes or skipped school or were at times highly disruptive in classes. All were far behind in credits. Of these nine, only two (both boys) graduated, one taking six years to do so, the other, seven.

These multiple designations were created to more accurately capture the differing kinds of academic participation in the sample. There has been a tendency to polarize urban students as either high achieving or alienated, missing the lower-performing academically oriented and ambivalent students who hover near the boundaries of these dispositions. When students are identified in the study, they will be referred to by their pseudonyms as well as by their academic orientation to help represent the ways academic identification may have framed student responses and to help clarify how some themes cut across academic orientations.

Resistance and Oppositionality

In seeking greater access to the coveted hall pass, my students suggested that the halls were more than just an escape from the classroom. The vast literature on student resistance assumes their alienation is a response to the oppressive aspects of schooling—such as boring teachers and disconnected curriculum. However, my students’ desire to get into the halls where a lively nonacademic urban youth culture thrived was not only about escaping the classroom but also about affirming another identity and experience. Andrea’s acknowledgment that whether class was interesting or boring she still wanted to leave the room and Akil’s assertion of having “business to attend to” in the halls emphasized the allure of hall activity.

This study, then, expands two significant, though discreet, debates about student resistance and academic achievement. One debate, between reproduction and resistance theorists, probes how schools are institutions of social control and the efficacy of student resistance against them. The other debate involves an “oppositional” culture among “involuntary minorities” whose marginalized position constructs academic achievement
as capitulation to dominant and racist culture. Both literatures construct students as either resisters or accommodators, a polarity inadequate in describing the multiple positions students took in the class I described above.

Though the debates about resistance offer frameworks that are too limited, they still raise important questions about student/school engagement. Reproduction theorists correctly argue that schools function to reproduce existing hierarchies in numerous and insidious ways (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Anyon 1980). Though at times quite intentional, through tracking and unequal funding for example, schooling’s role in maintaining inequality is not its explicit agenda. Apple (1990) refers to the indirection of these practices as “the hidden curriculum” to emphasize the political subtext behind the apparent subject matters and learning processes. Many studies have focused on “the hidden curriculum” as it reinforces oppressive hierarchies through practices such as curriculum, advising, teacher attitudes, discipline, testing, and tracking (Katz 1971; Anyon 1980; Oakes 1985; Apple 1990; Grant and Sleeter 1996; Lipman 1998; Ferguson 2000; Kohn 2000; Lewis 2004). Reproduction theorists have emphasized the structural work schools perform in maintaining inequality over the agency of students in resisting or transforming these institutions.

In contrast, resistance theory has shifted the discussion of social control away from what schools do to students to how schools and students interact to reproduce and resist dominant culture (Willis 1977; Giroux 1983; Foley 1990; Fine 1991; Fordham 1996; Levinson, Foley, and Holland 1996). For example, Willis’s exploration of the counter-school culture of “the lads,” the working-class British school boys at the center of his ground-breaking study, argued that students from oppressed groups actively resisted and even mocked school efforts to socialize them into docile workers. Nevertheless, the oppositional lads eagerly marched into the factory to work, taking their masculine place in the class hierarchy. Thus, their lively resistance to schooling did not lead them to resist the reproduction of class differences. To the contrary, they embraced their social location because of patriarchal and White supremacist ideologies that enabled some identification with power. Resistance studies that followed Willis’s suggest that students are not simply acted upon by institutions, but rather that social reproduction is a contention between official authority and student agency (Metz 1978; Foley 1990; Fine 1991). This notion
of contested cultural production more closely represents what I recorded at Renaissance and report in this book.

Advocates of student agency within the confines of the institution construct student resistance as positive and affirming. For example, Fine (1991) noted that the most resistant students—those who dropped out of high school—exhibited a higher self-esteem than those who stayed, suggesting that resistance was a form of protection against the psychic damage caused by assimilation into the culture of the school. Fordham (1996) also notes that the high- and underachieving Black students she studied developed strategies of resistance that preserved and protected Black identity. All in all, then, resistance theorists agree that students engage schools as social actors, but theorists disagree as to how much efficacy they have in the face of structural oppression.

Shifting focus from systemic issues to cultural issues, the debate over Ogbu’s (1988) “oppositional culture thesis” focuses on the extent and form of minority student identification with academic work. Ogbu explains the poor performance of Blacks and other “involuntary minorities” whose ancestors did not willingly migrate to the United States by arguing that they are participants in an oppositional culture that constructs academic success as a form of capitulation to the dominant system that devalues them. Though Ogbu defined oppositional culture as an “adaptation” to racism in the larger society, he emphasized the need to reject oppositionality over the need for social change. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) further demonstrated that Black students construct academic success as “White,” requiring that those students who do well in school affirm their blackness through other means.

Ogbu’s thesis has been soundly attacked by critics who argue that it is monolithic and overlooks the diversity of student subcultures and the numerous factors that inform identity (Lee 1999; Hemmings 2004). Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) found that in surveys about attitudes and academic habits, Black students, in comparison to their White and Asian peers, actually exhibit more positive attitudes toward education and more optimism about the potential outcomes of education, suggesting that claims of an oppositional culture are unfounded. Further, ethnographic studies that focus on academically successful minority students have challenged the “acting White” thesis, noting that highly successful minority students often exhibit positive attitudes toward their racial and
cultural identities and are not marginalized by their peers (Flores-Gonzalez 1999; Akom 2003; Horvat and Lewis 2003; Conchas 2006). This literature proposes instead that there are multiple student identities, some clearly associated with schooling.

The debate over oppositional culture overlaps with debates about social control as both question the relationship of student resistance to academic achievement. However, resistance theorists construct resistance as an important survival tool that is potentially transformative, while participants in the oppositional culture debate generally construct resistance and oppositional identity negatively and as factors interfering with academic success. There are significant exceptions, however. Akom’s (2003) study of high-achieving girls in the Nation of Islam offers an example of an oppositional identity that actually promoted academic achievement while also enabling a broad critique of schooling and White supremacy. Similarly, some high-achieving students at Renaissance, though not affiliated with the Nation of Islam, were also some of the most openly critical of school and social policies they saw as racist or unjust.

With these debates in mind, this study examines resistance and oppositionality as related yet distinct things. Not all resistance is oppositional and not all oppositionality is anti-academic. At Renaissance, the student culture in the halls was derived from the streets and articulated a notion of Black solidarity that conflicted with the mainstream culture promoted by school authorities. School practices such as scanning students for weapons or gang paraphernalia supported the construction of oppositional identities magnifying conflict rather than diminishing it. At the same time, however, many students described hall culture as irrelevant to classroom participation, others perceived them as opposed, and some described them in both terms. Thus, understanding this culture as oppositional is only partially accurate. Nonetheless, there were significant tensions between this student-defined culture and the culture that existed in the classrooms, which suggests the limits of current interpretations of student resistance.

As my students and I negotiated class rules that September morning, the students revealed many strategies they used to resist school authority, while they also sought to participate in academic culture to varying degrees. Some strategies, like asking to go the bathroom when they didn’t need to, allowed a plausible deniability of any sinister intent and thus didn’t seemingly disrupt the flow of the classroom enough to warrant
disciplinary action. Scott (1985) refers to such everyday forms of resistance as “infrapolitical,” a concept on which I will elaborate later in this book. The students also used humor to challenge my authority, to alter the relationships of power in the classroom, and to redirect the content. On the whole, their resistance in what proved to be a productive class moved from subtle nonparticipation to open mockery of teacher authority, from infrapolitical to open resistance. These shifts suggest the conflicted and contradictory nature of student and school relationships. There is a localized continuum, in any school site, between infrapolitical resistance, confrontation and oppositional culture (outright rejection of academics).

Part of the reason for these nuances of resistance was that few students who actually attend school regularly reject schooling outright. If they did, they simply would not come to school for the most part. Most students interviewed, regardless of their academic performance and orientation, wanted something from the school, whether it was merely a credential to secure a better job, academic knowledge, or access to the cultural capital needed for upward mobility. Though some students were articulately critical of school policies and teacher practices as well as suspicious of the school as a racist institution, they also sought things from the school and thus used it in conflicted ways. Theories of student agency, identity, and resistance need to account for these gradations, which is the goal of the coming chapters.

**Urban Schools as Sites of Conflict and Conflicted Sites**

Overall, then, public schools such as Renaissance suffer from multiple internal contradictions. On the one hand, they are grossly underfunded and racially segregated, but on the other hand, they represent “education” as the great equalizer, “euphemizing” (as Bourdieu puts it) their actual function of social reproduction with a promotional discourse of equal opportunity and the American Dream. A further internal contradiction exists in the teacher corps, many of whom enter education to be of humane service to diverse students whose learning matters to them. Yet, these same educators are officers of an unequal institution that is underfunded and over-regulated. Another contradiction is enacted by students themselves, who construct a derivative of street culture in the halls to compete with the classroom and who vibrate between seizing what they can from this place and pushing away its casual indignities.
Much of the literature examining the relationship between institutional control and student agency often constructs schools as relatively simple institutions that promote the unequal status quo via practices such as tracking, teacher assumptions, curriculum, limited access to opportunity or resources, standardized testing, and other school- or district-imposed practices. However, as my negotiations with my students suggests, urban schools themselves are conflicted places, charged with contradictory responsibilities, such as social reproduction and social change, which are often implemented by well-meaning people overwhelmed by demands and mandates that at times compromise their decency. Thus, just as urban schools have proven far from successful at promoting academic achievement, the high levels of student resistance in them suggests that they have also been far from efficient at imposing dominant cultural values. These fissures provide clever students with openings enabling them to exploit the imperfect match between institutional control and staff performance that more or less defines the local possibilities for resistance in any institution.

Though the conflicts of such an urban school are evident at the doorway screening or inside the hallways, it is also visible in the classroom where the academic rubber meets the road. The classroom is the labor-intensive vortex of school as an institution. My opening anecdote suggests some of the ways these conflicts manifest themselves in classrooms. For example, I began the class by bifurcating the rules between “dictatorship” and “democracy,” disavowing my own complicity in enforcing school rules. In so doing, I also destabilized the notion of authority since I was pretending I was not the only authority in the classroom. My emphasis on student input and negotiation—I kept insisting we were making these rules together even though I greatly controlled the discourse—also conflicted with more authoritarian notions of power. In line with the school’s reform effort, I sought to create a democratic culture in my classroom while students tested this offer by mocking me and teachers in general. The portrait of that first day gets close to what I propose is the genuine complexity of authority, resistance, and reproduction in specific classrooms.

Students’ written responses to my questions at the end of class suggested their distrust of the reform effort underway at the school and in my classroom. Asked which they preferred, democracy or dictatorship, slightly more than half the class preferred dictatorship, in part because it
was “faster.” Democratic negotiations took a long time, and clearly, these critics saw little substantive difference between the nonnegotiable rules and the ones on which we agreed. Other students rejected the permissiveness of the new rules. Even though they had been unanimously ratified, one student wrote, “Our rules are stupid! Students shouldn’t chew gum in class and they shouldn’t be late!” And another wrote that he preferred dictatorship “cause the teacher gonna do what the teacher gonna do.” In supporting dictatorship over democracy, students expressed frustration with the seemingly weakened authority of the teacher (that the new rules were too lax) and with the invulnerable authority of the teacher (she’ll do whatever she wants anyway).

The critiques of the new rules highlighted the multiple agendas operating for students simultaneously. Some had been vocal during our negotiations, even championing the new rules. That some of these students were angry about the rules indicated that they were willing to take whatever ground I would yield but were disappointed that I yielded it. Given the strong support for “dictatorship,” students were frustrated by democratic practices that were either weak or fraudulent but that were a central component of the school reform effort. Students brought different notions of teacher authority with them; some were informed by experiences in the West Indies, where teacher authority was high profile and respected. Their responses suggested that the reform effort confronted contradictory expectations by students, whose perspective was not uniform. For example, during the debate about lateness, which was mostly a debate among students themselves, Amanda, who went on to do serious work in class, scolded her peers, “Y’all know you shouldn’t be late!” She demanded that all lateness be punished, period. To her and others, some things shouldn’t be negotiated—students knew better and shouldn’t be held to a lower standard. At the same time that students were divided, so was the teacher within the system of mass education. I labored under restrictive mandates from the chancellor and the state that imposed a standardized curriculum, and thus I was always caught between the authorities above me and my political commitments to critical pedagogy and democratic culture. These external forces were at odds with the effort to create student-centered classrooms and curricula.

These multiple contradictions framed the cultural production of space at Renaissance and suggest that we need more nuanced theories of urban
school failure and of student resistance. The chapters that follow develop such a theory by tracing out the cultural formations instantiated in the numerous spaces that locate school experiences.

Structure of This Book

This book is divided into two parts. The first section examines the physical space itself and the territories clearly controlled by the school or by the students. I begin this exploration of the cultural production of space at Renaissance with a critical reading of the physical space itself. At Renaissance, with a stunning campus that had fallen into decay and then renovated to less-than-former glory, a critical reading of the physical place helps contextualize the cultural struggles enacted inside its walls. Old School is a landmark building whose legendary status has been used to elevate, motivate, and denigrate students over time. Chapter 1 examines the hidden curriculum of the architecture and the ways the physical space itself shapes action. Chapter 2 explores the scanning ritual students go through each morning as they enter school. Here the school exhibits its full force through a security apparatus that makes student bodies fit for school. At the same time, the school constructs some student identities as outlaw, demonizing urban styles associated with the “street” or with blackness more generally. These practices indicate that oppositional cultures are not exclusively student productions but also are informed by school practices that provoke conflicts. Chapter 3 examines what I call the “exclave” culture of the halls, which constitute a spatial domain within the school itself. Students import and modify their own urban youth cultures, installing an alternative cultural economy that competes with that promoted in classrooms. Though in some ways the halls were oppositional to classroom culture, many students insisted these separate spaces were irrelevant to each other rather than opposed. Thus, the exclave in the halls operated as what Soja (1996) has theorized as a “thirddspace,” a space that supported binaries between school-oriented and street-oriented identities, between academic participation and disidentification, and between group solidarity and individualism but also posited a third or “other” option as well. In this way, the exclave effect helps make visible the diverse responses of students to a similar set of circumstances and the range of influences on those decisions.
The second section focuses on the classroom as the most intense site of conflict. Chapter 4 examines the nature of school/student conflict through debates about whether students should speak Standard English or “Ebonics” in the classroom. This chapter exposes the differing stances of students toward school and local culture through their relationships to the dominant idiom and what it represents. It also clarifies how classrooms can be understood as what Pratt (1986) theorized as a “contact zone” where two cultures meet, though not on equal terms. Chapter 5 examines the infrapolitical resistance enacted to slow down or to avoid the transition from “the hall state” to the “student state.” By focusing on the persistent and effective though nonconfrontational resistance at the beginning of each and every class, this analysis exposes ideological conflicts inherent in classroom work. Chapter 6 uses the framework of “hidden” and “public” transcripts (Scott 1990), discourses used within subordinate groups and those used in front of those with power, to question the extent to which students internalize dominant discourses. I examine the work of class clowns within such a context to read the political content of their activities. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this work by exploring the ways spatial analysis allows a deeper reading of complex urban school cultures. It also explores the ways the findings reported here may influence future efforts at urban school reform.